

The Call of Freedom

May 26, 2019 | Sermon 18 | Greystone Baptist Church

Galatians 5: 1, 13 – 25

It is appropriate that our word of the week is “Freedom” as the Memorial Day holiday awaits us with cookouts, high temperatures, and a promise that summer has arrived.

There’s talk of freedom everywhere...

All different kinds

Freedom fries and hot dogs

freedom sales at our favorite stores

And the freedoms we enjoy as American citizens

Especially around this holiday

... we tend to think about freedom as an American concept.

While we are certainly grateful for our many freedoms, it is important to remember that we were not the inventors of freedom. In fact, I would like to think that those roots date all the way back to the beginning. Remember the creation stories of Genesis in which God creates humankind, male and female, and gives them freedom in the Garden of Eden. Their story reminds us that freedom involves choice and consequence, whether good or bad. Later in scripture Paul reminds us of other freedoms: freedom from the law, freedom from culture, and yes, sometimes even freedom from religion. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free...” he writes to the churches in Galatia. As Baptists, we know freedom in yet another sense as was famously (for Baptists) outlined in Walter Shurden’s 1993 book called, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*. “Fortunately, we are not limited to one word that summarizes the Baptist identity,” he writes, “but I am convinced that the one word that comes closer than any other to capturing the historic Baptist identity is the word, ‘freedom.’” [i]According to Shurden, this freedom manifests itself in the four areas of Christian life: salvation (Soul Freedom), religious authority (Bible Freedom), church life (Church Freedom) and civic life (Religious Freedom). [ii] Of course, with freedom comes difference and yes, sometimes even conflict. But this is part of the spirit of Baptist life.

You’ve heard the jokes, “Get three Baptists in a room, you’ll get at least 5 opinions...” Baptist have always been passionate about freedom. You might say, it is our unique calling. A quick glimpse at our history can remind us of this truth. In the 17th century, when Baptists emerged in England, there were already two kinds, General and Particular Baptists. General Baptists believed in free will and “falling from grace” while Particular Baptists held firm in their beliefs of “once saved, always saved.” In the eighteenth century, Baptists differed on worship style, education models, and lifestyle decisions, which caused more differentiation - more kinds of Baptists. In the nineteenth century, they disagreed on biblical interpretation and even their own Baptist history. In the twentieth century, opposite beliefs on slavery, segregation, and racism are represented by two prominent Baptists, Martin Luther King, Jr., a preacher, who

built the civil rights movement on biblical principles of freedom and restaurant owner, politician; and lifelong Baptist, Georgia Governor Lester Maddox who championed segregation, also based on biblical interpretation.

Baptists are a people called to freedom, we always have been and hopefully always will be.

The Baptist commitment to freedom changes and evolves over time. It unfolds differently in the lives of individual Baptists, and individual Baptist churches. For this reason, we hold fast to soul freedom and church freedom, which give us the grace to grow in faith and mission at our own pace, and as the Spirit comes to life within us. For Baptists, according to Shurden, freedom always comes with responsibility. Bible freedom is accountable to study with the best academic resources available, with an open mind, and a reverent spirit. Soul Freedom must ensure that each individual has the right to say yes or no to following Jesus without persuasion from culture, church, or family.

Church Freedom holds members responsible for participation in the full life of the church, including decision making, mission, and ministry. The fourth and final freedom is Religious Freedom. Contrary to popular belief, this is not a one-way pass given to churches by the first Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Rather, it is a sacred commitment made by Baptists to uphold and reinforce moral and spiritual truths as they pertain to all people... and to pray for the state and to “declare judgments of God as they relate to the government, responsible citizenship, and the rights of all people.” [iii]

Baptists are a people called to freedom, we always have been and hopefully always will be.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was written around 40 or 50 CE. During this time, there were many different kinds of slavery that were introduced and reinforced by the Roman empire. The economy was upheld by domestic workers, agricultural laborers, and even more specialized workers like physicians and accountants who worked with no pay and under brutal conditions. And there was yet another kind of slavery happening the Roman territories, at least according to Paul, who identifies spiritual slavery also known as slavery to the law. This spiritual captivity kept Jews and Gentiles alike subjugated below the religious laws and practices of the day and it relied upon an “us and them” mentality to sustain itself. You can see why the inclusion of Gentiles into this new church was so wrought with conflict – it was trying to bring together two groups of people with diametrically opposed thoughts, opinions, and practices together under one God who insists that living in the Spirit takes precedence over captivity to any laws be they civic or religious. The churches in first century Galatia struggled to figure out how all of this might come to life in their congregations and so Paul offers some guidance -- so that they might know how they are doing, living into their newfound freedoms. “I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh;” (Gal. 5:16-17a)

Since we are taking an historical look today, it seems critical to acknowledge the tension of these biblical words. For some time, interpreters have misunderstood Paul's contrast between flesh and spirit, equating "flesh" with "body" and thereby placing blame on our "bodies" [iv] or our "biology" for the temptations that we may experience. Body then has become synonymous with sin; and the gift of our very humanity has morphed into the curse of enfleshment. For Paul, however, the "works of the flesh are characteristics of a comprehensive way of life that stands in contrast to life in Christ." [v] To live concerned with the flesh is to focus on the finite things of this world rather than the eternal things of God.

Our lists might be a little different from Paul's list to the Galatians, after all, over 1900 years have passed. The things that imprisoned the Galatians were adherence to religious law, especially concerning circumcision and adherence to the ways of the Roman empire. They also struggled to release the laws of their culture which insisted on class-hierarchy and a slave economy. With pressures from both state and religion, the new churches in Galatia struggled to maintain the freedom found in Christ. Release all of that, Paul says. Let go of all that takes your allegiance away from the Spirit of God alive in your midst. Whether those distractions come from Rome or religious officials, you have to let them go. Choose instead the greater freedom of the living God, a freedom that looks like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let these be the sum of your life, not those other things. Christ has set you free, now go and live freely in the Spirit.

There is great irony in our current Baptist reputation and our historic Baptist identity. Baptists in America (and especially in the South) are known more as people bound by an old religious law, recorded in an ancient book than we are known as a people who follow a living God, with a spirit of "Freedom". "Baptists are not perceived as freedom-lovers [or] freedom-givers," [vi] Shurden says, despite the world's deep need for a free and prophetic voice for God's love in this world. I wonder why that is? I wonder how we lost our spirit of freedom? Are we afraid of what might happen if we release the ways of our past - ways that used to work - Ways that used to make sense when we were younger? Are we afraid that if our sons and daughters experience or express their faith a little differently it might not be as strong as our own? Are we afraid that if we let go of one thing, everything else will begin to unravel? Or maybe it isn't fear at all, maybe it's that we are enslaved and can't even see it? Maybe we are captive to our own nostalgia and grief about what might have been. Maybe we are imprisoned by personal losses that paralyze and confine us to a moment in the past that is long gone and never coming back. There are so many things that are ready to hold us captive as a church and individually if we only let them. Because our world (and sadly sometimes even our religious institutions) stand ready to offer us the smaller freedoms of individual success and salvation, many are suffering under the yoke of slavery and are hungry for a greater freedom that can only be found in the living God.

Many of us are searching for freedom... We are searching for financial freedom, and freedom from a performance mentality. We need to be freed from our own perfectionism that sets us up for failure and tells us that we will never measure up. We need to be freed from our

addictions, to screens, to substances, and to unhealthy rhythms of life. We need to be freed from worry and stress about what the future holds, and all that we cannot control... We are longing for freedom and there are that we so many things that we need to be free from. It makes me wonder what we as a church need to let go of? Are there conflicts and disagreements from the past that keep showing up in the present? Maybe we need to set ourselves free. Is there grief and pain over losses we have endured together that we need to be able to leave behind? Maybe we need to set ourselves free. Are there ministries and programs that served us well years ago but don't seem to have the same impact today? Maybe we need to set ourselves free. Are we anxious and worried about the future because we don't yet know how to repair the broken church? Maybe we need to set ourselves free. Free and open to the "new thing" that God may be creating right here, even now... in our midst. What is it that needs to be set free so that we can accept the greatest freedom of all? What will it take for us – the Greystone Baptist Church – to become freedom-lovers once again?

Whatever it is, whatever work towards freedom that we need to do in order to open ourselves to God's dreams for our lives... I believe it must begin with grace. For us to become people of freedom we have to truly forgive ourselves for all the times we have traded in God's freedom for the lesser freedoms that this world has to offer. We've got to forgive ourselves and one another. Only then can we extend the grace required to freely FOLLOW the Spirit of God into the world. And after we have released ourselves from all that holds us captive, ...Only then, might we be able to go out from here with a message of liberating hope and healing to our neighbors who are hungry and searching for the freedom that only God can offer.

Freedom is God's ultimate gift to humanity. Freedom from the many different kinds of prisons that we experience in our lives. These false freedoms may look good for a little while, but they pale in comparison to the freedom we know in God.

Poet Maya Angelou captures this beautifully in her poem, *Caged Bird*.

A free bird leaps
On the back of the wind
And floats downstream
Till the current ends
And dips his wing
In the orange sun rays
And dares to claim the sky...
but a bird that stalks
Down his narrow cage
Can seldom see through
His bars of rage
His wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing. [vii]

For freedom, Christ has set us free. Free from the guilt and shame of our past and free to live as God's beloved. Free from the myth that we can and must do it alone and free to live our lives woven together in beloved community. Free from the grueling pace of our performance culture and free to live lives that make time for relationships to grow and blossom. Free from obsession with the treasures of this world and free for the sake of God's holy work, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead. Since we have been set free, let us not give in to the yoke of slavery. Instead, may God give us the courage to leap on the back of the wind and ride in the river of the Holy Spirit. Set free in our world. May God make us brave enough to reach up and to claim the sky proclaiming the good news that God HAS and IS, even now, setting us free.

Thanks be to God.

Benediction:

May God bless you and keep you,

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;

Grace to risk something big for something good; and

Grace to remember the world is now too dangerous for anything but the truth and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take your feet and move through them May God take your hands and work with them

And may God take your hearts and set them FREE.

Amen.

[i]Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*. p.55

[ii]Ibid. p.56

[iii]Baptist Ideals section 5 in Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*. , p.109.

[iv]John D. Crossan. *The First Paul*. p.206.

[v]Ibid.

[vi]Shurden, p.55 [vii]<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>. Retrieved May 24,2019.